SAINTE-BEUVE AND REALISM IN THE NOVEL

BY

BRUCE HALE MAINOUS

A.B., College of William and Mary, 1935
A.M., University of Illinois, 1939

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN FRENCH
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1948

URBANA, ILLINOIS
1948

SAINTE-BEUVE AND REALISM IN THE NOVEL

BY

BRUCE HALE MAINOUS

A.B., College of William and Mary, 1935
A.M., University of Illinois, 1939

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN FRENCH
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1948

URBANA, ILLINOIS
1948

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The writer wishes to express his sincere appreciation to Professor Joseph F. Jackson for his careful and invaluable assistance in the preparation of this study, and to those other professors without whose kindly guidance this work could never have been undertaken.

R. UNIV.
BIBLIOTHEEK
LEIDEN

SAINTE-BEUVE AND REALISM IN THE NOVEL

I

SAINTE-BEUVE, CONTEMPORARY OF THE REALISTIC MOVEMENT

The criticism of Sainte-Beuve has been well established as one of the outstanding literary accomplishments of the nineteenth century. Beginning in 1824, when Sainte-Beuve was but a youth of nineteen, and continuing until the very moment of his death in 1869, Sainte-Beuve's critical work reflects the development of the century's two great literary movements, romanticism and realism.

The problem of this study is to ascertain Sainte-Beuve's attitude toward realism in its most important literary manifestation, realism in the novel. Thus, the realistic movement is of greater interest to this work, but since realism had its roots in romanticism, and in some cases flourished concurrently with it, some discussion of the novels of romanticism cannot be avoided, and Sainte-Beuve's critical career must be considered in relation to both movements.

If Sainte-Beuve's career as a literary critic is compared chronologically with the development of realism in the novel, it will be seen that his criticism deserves particular consideration in regard to this movement. Sainte-Beuve's first published article appeared in the *Globe* in 1824, only a few years before the beginnings of realism could be perceived in the works of Balzac and Stendhal. The articles of the *Lundi* series, Sainte-Beuve's greatest literary accomplishment, had their inception in 1849, a year which witnessed also the formation of the realistic cénacle of Courbet and Champfleury. Sainte-Beuve continued to be active in literary criticism until his death in 1869, when realism proper was giving way to naturalism.

II

SAINTE-BEUVE AND THE NOVEL PRIOR TO THE *LUNDIS*

It is almost impossible to engage in any study of Sainte-Beuve's work without proceeding somewhat as he would himself when discussing an author, by studying the man, his character and personality, and the various influences about him. Sainte-Beuve, especially in his youth, was very impressionable and given to sudden changes in affections and attitudes, traits which were reflected in his criticism. This was all the more true since Sainte-Beuve, desiring to be a creative writer and believing himself only incidentally a critic, started with no fixed critical doctrine. His method evolved of itself as his criticism advanced, little by little, fitting the circumstances and the works and authors in question. Any satisfactory study of Sainte-Beuve's critical attitudes is thus more or less naturally bound up with the life and personality of the man.

Sainte-Beuve's youth is usually identified with romanticism and idealism, involving as it did his romance with Mme Hugo, his passage through the schools of Hugo, Saint-Simon, and Lamennais, and the creation of *Joseph Delorme* and several volumes of poetry. Sainte-Beuve's own remarks show nevertheless that his earlier training in the medical school and on the staff of the *Globe* continued to influence him in varied degree throughout this period. Writing in retrospect of these years of his youth, Sainte-Beuve recognized that his basic philosophy was that of the Ideologists, Tracy, Daunou, Lamarck. As early as 1828, Sainte-Beuve was applying in his criticism theories similar to that of "la race, le milieu, et le moment," later made famous by Taine. In 1829, during his period of full romanticism, Sainte-Beuve warned that one should include some trace of reality in even the most idealistic works. Writing of his own criticism in 1836, Sainte-Beuve pointed to his scientific manner, remarking that the study of an author under his pen always ran the risk

of becoming an anatomical dissection. In 1840, he wrote that his aim had been to introduce into criticism a sort of charm and at the same time more reality than had been customary before; in a word, he wanted to endow criticism with both poetry and physiology. With the aid of his scientific method, Sainte-Beuve was willing to go beyond the dissection and analysis of an individual; an individual once analyzed, it would be possible to classify him with other individuals in that "famille naturelle d'esprits" to which he belonged. Such passages as these, scattered throughout Sainte-Beuve's works from 1828 to 1847, show well enough that he was from the first convinced of the soundness of positivism and the scientific viewpoint.

This fact would seem to indicate that Sainte-Beuve might welcome the advent of a literary genre such as the realistic novel, that he might seek out and encourage those who were to be the *porte-parole* of positivism in the novel as he himself was in criticism. A glance at Sainte-Beuve's own works of fiction tends to corroborate this view, since such works as the *Vie de Joseph Delorme* and *Volupté* have their point of departure in real life, and *Volupté,* especially, is written with a closeness of observation and analytical penetration comparable to that of *Le Rouge et le Noir,* for example. An examination of Sainte-Beuve's criticism of novelists shows, however, that he encountered realism in the novel with a mixed attitude.

Because of their special significance to this problem, the criticisms of the following novelists were chosen for study in this regard: Mme de Staël, Chateaubriand, Senancour, Guttinguer, Hugo, Musset, Vigny, Balzac, Charles de Bernard, Delécluze, Mérimée, George Sand, and Eugène Sue.

Judging Mme de Staël's *Delphine,* Sainte-Beuve finds it to be a natural novel of analysis, but not as natural and real as he would like it, partly because of the letter form in which it was written. He praises the poetic quality of *Atala,* but objects to Chateaubriand's use of imagination, which results in the fictitious and unreal. *René* is perfect; it is the true

portrayal of the youth of an epoch. Sainte-Beuve calls Senancour's *Obermann* one of the truest books of the century. He recommends Guttinguer's *Arthur* as a model for Balzac because of its powers of observation and narration, and because of its marvelously rendered *tableaux*. Sainte-Beuve shows his dissatisfaction with Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, observing that the characters are only partly real, and that the religious aspects of the Middle Ages are greatly distorted. The critic lauds Musset's *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* because parts of it rank with the best of the love idylls, but also because this work is a study of the moral effects of debauchery, with confessions of evident reality. Sainte-Beuve finds that Vigny's works all suffer from a certain lack of reality, though he approves *Stello* as a penetrating analysis of delicate sufferings. Balzac's works are a strange mixture of factual reality and incredible fantasy, for example *La Peau de chagrin*, of which the beginning is lively and natural, but which soon becomes lost in the fantastic, and *La Maison Claës* (*La Recherche de l'absolu*), in which the mark of reality is lacking. Balzac's disciple, Charles de Bernard, never abandons the real for the fantastic, and he uses his powers of observation to good effect in *La Femme de quarante ans*. His novel *Gerfaut* is good except for the ending, which is too dramatic and unreal. The novel of Delécluze, *Mademoiselle Justine de Liron*, is a work which contains in each line the traces of reality observed or felt. Discussing Mérimée, whose novels and tales he likes almost without exception, Sainte-Beuve writes at length on Mérimée's portrayal of reality, his regard for facts, and his objectivity. Reading George Sand, Sainte-Beuve is delighted with *Indiana* because it depicts manners and people as they are, though the last pages are not good because the true part of it, written from observation and experience, ends, and invention and fantasy take charge. In *Valentine*, Sainte-Beuve would have preferred a natural conversation to the eloquent but artificial tirade which results from Valentine's drinking opium. In *Lélia*, he finds some scenes which he, as "un grand réaliste," feels are from real life, but he regrets nevertheless that the author has not confined herself within the

limits of probability, and he hopes that she will return to the novel of real life. In the works of Eugène Sue, Sainte-Beuve sees reality principally in *Arthur,* but he remarks that the character Arthur is too odious to be depicted realistically; such a one-sided presentation is a refinement of corruption and is not true of a healthy nature. Sainte-Beuve advises Sue to continue to paint such sad realities, but without forcing them to take on false proportions; Shakespeare and Molière should serve as models.

An analysis of these observations shows that the novels praised by Sainte-Beuve never fail to possess the quality of reality; when he feels that a novel is weak, it is usually because the novel fails to give an impression of reality, or in some way has abused the limits of probability. It is evident, then, that Sainte-Beuve, even prior to the realistic ascendancy in literature, considered realism one of the prime attributes of a novel.

It is true that Sainte-Beuve's conception of realism was not that of the later self-styled realists. Sainte-Beuve was satisfied with the reality of a novel which gave a truthful analysis of a character or of an emotion and which stayed within the bounds of probability. Realism for him was a portrayal of reality, and reality as he understood it did not preclude the idealistic. His conception of realism, then, prior to 1849, was different from that of the realistic school which was to form around Courbet and Champfleury, though both conceptions had their bases in the same nineteenth century positivism.

III

SAINTE-BEUVE AND THE REALISTIC NOVEL

Although at first there existed important differences between Sainte-Beuve's conception of realism and that of Champfleury, certain utterances of Sainte-Beuve after 1849 show that he continued to progress with the trends of his century, so that his position in regard to realism in art became somewhat closer to that of the realists. Though respectful of

the classical tradition, Sainte-Beuve makes the observation that tradition alone is insufficient for studying contemporary literature. Modern conditions impose upon the writer bodily labor which the classical author never knew; the critic must now study the physiology and hygiene of the author in question. Sainte-Beuve gives a scientific name to his criticism; it is literary natural history. The name of Bacon is evoked as a model for the literary critic. Sainte-Beuve proclaims himself to be of the school of Taine and Renan; he was even of the school before the formula.

Positivistic in thought and scientific in method, Sainte-Beuve considers himself a realist in literature. In 1860, he calls himself a pure realist. Other remarks show that he realized the full implication of the term "realist" in its contemporary sense. He recommends that portraits be as lifelike as possible, without embellishment; the visage of the subject should be complete with warts and blemishes. He remarks that he likes above all the natural in art. He now admits that the faithful portrayal of reality may include the depiction of its unpleasant and brutal features; one must not forbid the moderns to study and reproduce this side of nature. With Cousin's work in mind, Sainte-Beuve asserts that if he had a motto, it would be the true, and the true alone, even at the expense of the good and the beautiful.

It is clear, then, that Sainte-Beuve after 1849 was a part of the realistic movement, and would seem designated as a natural patron of the realistic novel. A study of his criticism of this period shows, however, that in spite of the movement he had made toward the new realism, he was not yet prepared to accept the realistic program *in toto* where the novel was concerned. The criticisms most pertinent to this problem after 1849 are those bearing on the following novelists: Constant, Balzac, George Sand, Stendhal, Champfleury, Ferdinand Fabre, Feydeau, Flaubert, Fromentin, the Goncourts, and Zola.

It is possible to summarize the criticisms of these authors

under the headings of (1) truth, (2) taste and morality, (3) style, since Sainte-Beuve's observations fall naturally into these general groups.

(1) Truth: Sainte-Beuve remarks that *Adolphe,* a "petit chef-d'oeuvre," combines the double character of art and truth. In the works of Balzac, he finds many true, living characters, but the action of these novels is exaggerated, and much of Balzac's physiology is based on intuition rather than observation. Sainte-Beuve praises the pastorals of George Sand for their natural pictures and situations; only *La Petite Fadette* is somewhat false because of the composite rustic dialect in which the story is told. Stendhal's defect as a novelist is that he came to this genre of composition through criticism and with certain preconceived ideas. Sainte-Beuve finds Stendhal's novels extravagant; the characters are automatons and the action is often improbable. Sainte-Beuve approves the realism of Champfleury, because it is sincere; it is a realism which does not exclude feeling. Sainte-Beuve mentions Ferdinand Fabre's *Les Courbezon* as one of the best modern novels; this is a realistic novel reminiscent of both Balzac and Champfleury. The realism of Fabre's *Le Chevrier* suffers from the use of a composite peasant dialect. Sainte-Beuve ascribes the success of Feydeau's *Fanny* to the truth of the situation. In Fromentin's *Dominique* Sainte-Beuve found a novel of reality, except for the ending, a novel which, for a change, consoled the reader and told of respectable people. Sainte-Beuve was struck by the realistic power of *Madame Bovary,* by the truth of many of the scenes, and by the author's objectivity, but he found only the flat, insipid, and unpleasant aspects of reality portrayed in this work. Sainte-Beuve applies this latter criticism also to *Salammbô,* in which it is clear that Flaubert has deliberately chosen the most brutal and disagreeable subjects for his pen. This characteristic, shared by the Goncourts, who seek out exclusively the frightful and tragic side of truth, results in a falsification of reality, and so detracts from the truth of the work. *Salammbô* lacks veracity also because of the impossibility of portraying reality in a historical novel,

particularly when the novel deals with a period of such remoteness. The action in *Salammbô,* moreover, is frequently improbable. Criticizing *Thérèse Raquin,* Sainte-Beuve calls Zola inconsistent in the application of his scientific theories. Sainte-Beuve shows that the description of the *passage du Pont-Neuf* is falsified, and he designates a point in the book beyond which the narrative is no longer sustained by observation, but by imagination. Zola, too, is guilty of choosing the worst in reality, for his characters, though well portrayed, are made expressly flat and vulgar.

(2) Taste and morality: Sainte-Beuve indicates that he considers the presentation of the character of Stendhal's Fabrice to be of doubtful moral value; Fabrice conducts himself like an unprincipled animal. Those whom we may call the great realists, Flaubert, the Goncourts, Zola, receive most of the criticism under this category, just as they received the burden of the adverse criticism concerning truth. Sainte-Beuve observes that the realistic method of minute observation coupled with detailed description, when applied to certain delicate scenes and prolonged, may give the passage a tinge of eroticism. This observation was made for the benefit of the author of *Madame Bovary,* but with little effect, for Sainte-Beuve's criticism of certain passages in *Salammbô* is in the same vein. Both Flaubert and the Goncourts, by emphasizing the grosser aspects of reality, try deliberately to shock the *bourgeois,* their artistic creed including fear of middle-class sentimentalism and a feeling that this can be avoided by violating the accepted standards of taste and morality. Zola falls into a similar error, his vocabulary repeatedly making use of such words as "vautrer" and "brutal." Sainte-Beuve, on the other hand, admits that Champfleury's realism is a somewhat raw and bitter liquor, but he remarks that it is healthful, unadulterated, and often comforting.

(3) Style: Comparing *Adolphe* and *Fanny* as examples of the old style and the new, Sainte-Beuve seems to prefer the new, remarking that *Adolphe* suffers from the subtlety and vagueness in vogue at the time it was written, whereas in

Fanny everything is clearly depicted. Balzac, too, should have remembered that clarity is the polish of the master. Stendhal, attempting to be brief and concise, has purged his language of color and poetry. With Champfleury, truth compensates for lack of form. In *Dominique,* the style is praised for portraiture and description; the description is not excessive or prolonged, and the author indicates spiritual as well as physical traits in his descriptions of people. Flaubert is praised for his objectivity in *Madame Bovary,* but in this novel and particularly in *Salammbô,* for all his firmness and finesse, the author is guilty of excessive description. In his pictures the central object is often lost in a mass of details. The Goncourts also possess this last defect, a result of their efforts to write with the pen as an artist paints with his brush. The Goncourts force their style by the overuse of the "épithète *rare.*"

IV

Conclusion

Analyzing the material presented above, it is possible to arrive at the following conclusions, each of which represents a component of Sainte-Beuve's general attitude toward realism in the novel:

(1) Sainte-Beuve is satisfied with the truth, and therefore with the realism, of a novel which gives a portrayal of reality as it exists in nature, emphasizing neither the good nor the bad, neither the materialistic nor the idealistic.

(2) He condemns the *roman à lettres* as a handicap to realism in the novel.

(3) He requires that a novel be based fundamentally upon observation of life and nature.

(4) He considers objectivity on the part of the author a sign of strength; the author's presence should not be felt.

(5) He will not accept as a portrayal of reality any novel constructed on a pattern of preconceived ideas.

(6) He will not tolerate any arbitrary rearrangement of nature, neither that perpetrated by those who deliberately write upon its disagreeable side, nor that practised by Fromentin and George Sand, who are too idealistic.

(7) He requires the plot and action of a novel to be within the bounds of probability.

(8) He believes the portrayal of reality to be an impossibility in the historical novel.

(9) He considers the use of dialect in the narrative harmful to the realistic effect of a novel.

(10) He finds that excessive application of the minute descriptive method may result in poor taste, and, in some cases, in eroticism.

(11) He considers erroneous that conception of art which he attributes to Flaubert and the Goncourts, namely, that art must necessarily offend the accepted standards of taste and morality, in order to shock the *bourgeois.*

(12) He warns that excessive application of the minute descriptive method, by multiplying the aspects of a *tableau,* may cause the central figure to become lost in a welter of detail, resulting in confusion in the mind of the reader.

Sainte-Beuve's realism having already been established, the most interesting points in the above summary are those proceeding from the adverse observations affecting the great realists, Flaubert, the Goncourts, and Zola, since these criticisms will serve to fix Sainte-Beuve's position in regard to realism as it came to be practised in the outstanding novels of the movement. We find, then, that Sainte-Beuve is in hearty sympathy with the effort to represent reality in a novel; he approves the method of close observation and faithful reproduction of the facts of nature. If some of this nature is unpleasant and brutal, if some aspects shock preconceived standards of the beautiful and the good, if the literature of this inspiration is not valid in the light of traditional criteria,

Sainte-Beuve will still accept it, provided that it is faithful to reality. Therein lies the crux of Sainte-Beuve's quarrel with the great realists.

Their faults are twofold: (1) they have an erroneous conception of the nature and ends of art: by choosing exclusively the unpleasant aspects of reality on which to exercise their talents, they falsify nature; this trait comes from an erroneous conception which refuses to art any agreeable and consoling effect, but which requires it to violate normal standards of taste and morality; (2) the realists are excessive in the application of the realistic method of detailed reproduction of facts, especially in description; this excess at times makes of them mere *commissaires-priseurs,* and often results in utter confusion in the mind of the reader, thus defeating the author's ends.

In a word, Sainte Beuve finds that these authors do not combine "art et vérité," as does *Adolphe;* their realism is not that of Champfleury, which Sainte-Beuve approves, since it is a realism which "n'exclut nullement la sensibilité," and, finally, they do not fulfil Sainte-Beuve's precept of "le naturel dans l'art."

So much for the negative side of Sainte-Beuve's stand. Sainte-Beuve was by no means at a loss for positive suggestions: the author who wishes to paint reality will not seek vainly for models; he need go only to the great and eternal painters such as Shakespeare and Molière. The realistic author can find no better method than that of Shakespeare, who shows us people and things as they are, but also no uglier nor worse than they are.

The realistic creed of these great painters satisfies the requirements of truth and denotes a sound morality as well; it is simply the portrayal of a healthy nature in which the elements of good are ever present to console for the more brutal facts of life.

This conception of realism in art is also that of Sainte-

Beuve. It is one which does him honor, revealing as it does his relationship with Molière and Shakespeare, the most human of the great writers.

VITA

Bruce Hale Mainous was born August 2, 1914, at Appalachia, Virginia. He received his secondary education at Appalachia High School, where he began the study of the French language under the guidance of Miss Elizabeth Huff. He graduated from the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, with the A. B. degree in 1935. During the school year of 1935-1936 he served as *assistant d'anglais* at the Lycée de Nîmes, Nîmes (Gard), France, and during the year 1936-1937 he taught in the Derby Grade School, Derby, Virginia. Since 1937, except for a leave of absence for service with the Navy, he has pursued graduate work in French, Spanish, and German at the University of Illinois, where he received the M. A. degree in 1939, and where he has held the position of assistant at various times in the departments of French and Spanish-Italian.